



SAFEGUARDING UPDATE

WITH DR SANDRA WISEMAN

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Children referred to Prevent – what schools need to know

A new report from the Children's Commissioner for England raises important questions about what happens to children after schools make a referral to Prevent. The report highlights a group of children whose behaviour may cause significant concern, including a fixation with extreme violence, harmful online content or mass-casualty attacks but who may not have an identifiable extremist ideology. As a result, they may not meet the threshold for support through Prevent.

For schools, the message is particularly important: a Prevent referral being closed does not necessarily mean that the safeguarding concerns have gone away.

What did the report find?

The number of Prevent referrals involving children has risen significantly, from 2,918 in 2016/17 to 4,715 in 2024/25. More than half of all Prevent referrals in 2024/25 involved children.

However, the report found that:

- **71%** of referrals involving children had no clear extremist ideology identified.
- **79%** of children's referrals were closed without progressing through the Prevent programme.
- Almost three in five referrals involving children came from education settings.
- At least **65%** of referrals made by schools and colleges were returned to education settings when the Prevent referral was closed.
- Of those returned, **93%** had not progressed to a panel discussion or received support through the programme.

This can leave schools continuing to manage significant concerns about a child without necessarily having received additional specialist intervention.

What behaviours are causing concern?

The report describes children whose presentation may not fit traditional ideas of radicalisation but whose behaviour nevertheless presents serious safeguarding concerns.

Examples include children who are:

- frequently talking about weapons;
- idolising well-known attackers;
- displaying a fascination with extreme violence or mass-casualty attacks;
- viewing or sharing videos depicting extreme violence, suicide or other disturbing material;
- sharing extreme pornography with peers;
- encouraging others to enter dangerous online communities; or
- encouraging other children to self-harm.

Importantly, these behaviours may sit alongside other vulnerabilities, including exploitation, bullying, unstable home circumstances or unmet needs. Professionals interviewed for the report also expressed significant concern about children's exposure to extremist and violent material online.

Why does this matter for schools?

Schools are often in a unique position to notice changes, patterns and escalating behaviour over time. A child may make a disturbing comment, repeatedly search for violent material, become increasingly preoccupied with particular attacks or perpetrators, share concerning content with peers, or begin expressing a desire to harm themselves or others.

Individually, some behaviours may be difficult to interpret. Taken together, they may indicate a much more significant safeguarding concern. The report therefore reinforces the importance of professional curiosity and looking beyond the presenting behaviour.

The question should not simply be "Does this meet the Prevent threshold?" but also:

"What is happening for this child, what is driving this behaviour, and what support or intervention do they need?"

A closed Prevent referral is not the end of the safeguarding response

This is perhaps the most important message for DSLs. Where a school makes a Prevent referral and it does not progress, this should not automatically bring the school's safeguarding response to an end. The original concerns may still exist.

Schools should consider whether there are other appropriate safeguarding pathways and whether further assessment, information sharing or multi-agency involvement is required. Depending on the circumstances, this may include children's social care, Early Help/Family Help, mental health services, police or other specialist services.

Schools should also continue to record, review and monitor concerns, particularly where there is evidence of escalation or new information becomes available.

What is the Children's Commissioner recommending?

The Children's Commissioner is calling for a stronger safeguarding response for children who are fixated on violence but do not have an identifiable extremist ideology.

Her central recommendation is that children currently referred to Prevent should instead be assessed through a local multi-agency safeguarding team, involving Counter Terrorism Policing where appropriate. Children could then be directed either towards Prevent or another safeguarding intervention according to their individual needs and risks.

She also argues that where Prevent is not the appropriate pathway, there must be much greater clarity about what support should be offered instead and which service is responsible for providing it.

What should schools do now?

Schools should continue to follow their statutory Prevent responsibilities and local referral procedures. However, the report provides a useful opportunity for DSL teams to review how they respond to children displaying concerning, violent or extremist-related behaviour.

Questions to consider include:

- Do staff understand that radicalisation is a safeguarding concern and know how to report concerns?

- Are staff alert to patterns of behaviour, rather than waiting for an explicit extremist statement?
- Would staff recognise concerning online behaviours, including a growing fixation with violence, attackers or harmful communities?
- Do safeguarding records capture the context, frequency and escalation of concerning behaviour?
- When making a Prevent referral, are we sharing the fullest possible picture of the child's vulnerabilities, circumstances and behaviour?
- If a Prevent referral does not progress, do we actively consider what other safeguarding response is required?
- Are we confident about our local escalation and professional disagreement procedures if significant concerns remain?
- Do we continue to monitor the child and respond to new or escalating information?

The key message for schools

Prevent should be viewed as one part of the wider safeguarding system not as the only response to concerning behaviour.

A child may not meet the threshold for Prevent intervention but may still be vulnerable, exploited, distressed, fixated on violence or potentially present a risk to themselves or others.

For schools, "no further action from Prevent" should never automatically mean "no further safeguarding action."

Professional curiosity, good recording, information sharing, multi-agency working and continued assessment of the child's needs and risks remain essential.

Read:

<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/children-referred-to-the-prevent-programme/>

Press release:

<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/press-notice/press-notice-childrens-commissioner-demands-reform-of-anti-extremism-programme/>

Mentalising and emotion regulation – what schools need to know

Children's behaviour can sometimes be the first indication that something is wrong. An article from the Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health (ACAMH) explores how understanding mentalising and emotion regulation can help adults look beyond presenting behaviour and consider what a child may be experiencing underneath it.

Why does this matter for safeguarding?

Children who find it difficult to regulate their emotions may respond through anger, aggression, withdrawal, avoidance or behaviour that adults find challenging. **These behaviours may**

sometimes be linked to experiences such as:

- abuse or neglect;
- trauma or instability;
- bullying or child-on-child abuse;
- exploitation;
- difficulties at home;
- online experiences; or
- emotional distress.

The research also highlights how trauma can affect the way children interpret situations. A child who has experienced threat or instability may become particularly alert to danger and respond strongly to situations that others may not perceive as threatening.

What should schools consider?

- Do staff recognise that behaviour may be communication?
- Are changes or patterns in behaviour recorded and shared with the DSL?
- Do staff remain professionally curious rather than making assumptions?
- Are children given opportunities to speak with trusted adults?
- Do we consider the child's wider circumstances and relationships?
- Where concerns persist or escalate, are appropriate safeguarding and multi-agency pathways considered?

Read:

<https://www.acamh.org/blog/mentalising-and-emotion-regulation-in-children-and-families/>

Safeguarding Network Meeting - TBC

This free Safeguarding Network Meeting will provide an opportunity for Designated Safeguarding Leads, Deputy DSLs and senior leaders to reflect on how the changes are working in practice, discuss emerging issues and ask any questions that have arisen. The session will be practical, interactive and discussion-based, and will include:

- ✓ **KCSIE 2026 – Frequently asked questions**
- ✓ **Interactive safeguarding scenarios based on real-life situations schools are facing**
- ✓ **Discussion around professional curiosity, online safety and AI, Family Help, child-on-child abuse, information sharing, record keeping and decision making**
- ✓ **Sharing safeguarding challenges, ideas and good practice with colleagues from across our schools**

Free to schools subscribing to our Safeguarding SLA. I hope you can join us.

Forthcoming free safeguarding webinars for Autumn term 1 2026

Online safety – Tuesday 8th September

Pupils mental health – Tuesday 15th September

Depression – Tuesday 22nd September

Anxiety – Tuesday 29th September

Self harm and suicidal ideation – Tuesday 6th October

Anti-bullying – Tuesday 13th October

Domestic abuse – Tuesday 20th October

Everything you need for September 2026:

<https://www.services4schools.org.uk/cpd-zone/safeguarding/safeguarding-everything-you-need-for-september-2026>

Dr Sandra Wiseman S4S Safeguarding Lead/Specialist

Email: Sandra.Wiseman@services4schools.org.uk

Mobile: 07786 582266